

EPA seeks U.S Labor help on wages

“The reason you are here is the same thing that happened years ago. They tried to do it cheap.”

Union official

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Libby Superfund project manager Jim Christiansen is seeking help from the U.S. Department of Labor to determine a fair wage for Libby workers.

Christiansen's announcement came Friday, on the heels of a workers' meeting Thursday night to discuss strategy for a Tuesday night meeting with EPA. That meeting included representatives from the Operating Engineers union who urged workers to get organized.

Christiansen said he was seeking a wage

adjustment for workers because the rate being used during cleanup was carried over from a heavy-construction rate used in the initial investigation of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite in the Libby area. Less than two weeks ago, workers were told their wages would drop \$10 an hour. People who had been paid hourly wages of \$24.29 to \$29.38 will now be paid \$14 to \$18 for every hour of work.

None of the wages include benefits.

There are four levels of wages for construction workers in Lincoln County under the federal Davis-Bacon Wage Act.

Christiansen said there is no wage schedule for asbestos-removal workers so local workers were put under residential construction.

Christiansen has said he didn't like the way the wage determination and announcement "unfolded."

"It was terrible," he said. "It shouldn't have happened the way it did."

He said his motives in reducing hourly wages were part of something that is not a new issue for the Libby cleanup.

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"I've been struggling to get the costs down from the beginning," he said. "The last thing I had to look at was the sacred cow: What do we pay these workers?"

Christiansen said he would not do "something like this unless he was desperate."

The budget for Libby cleanups has been cut by more than \$5 million for the upcoming fiscal year forcing the EPA to consider cutting costs or adjusting the schedule for the cleanup efforts. The EPA's goal is to complete 200 residential cleanups a year with about 1300 houses on the Superfund list.

Overall payroll for the Libby project, estimated at \$5 million

to \$6 million, won't change, Christiansen said. He plans to hire more workers at the reduced rate. A total of \$9 million to \$10 million a year is spent in the Libby area on the cleanup.

On Thursday, irate workers vented their frustration with the EPA decision and decided Vince Parker and Tony Brown would speak for the workers at a Tuesday, Feb. 11, meeting at the Ponderosa Room with EPA officials.

Lincoln County Commissioners and Mayor Tony Berget were at the meeting to hear what workers had to say.

"It's not an ethical way to treat workers, especially people

who made career moves to take these jobs," Commissioner John Konzen said.

About half the workers at the meeting said they were former Stimson Lumber Co. workers who lost their jobs when the mill closed Dec. 31, 2002. Those workers said they gave up the option of going to school, training or college to take the EPA contract jobs.

Other workers said they changed jobs to take the cleanup work, which for many of them is seasonal.

One employee explained that to get the federal cleanup jobs, the workers had to take \$1,000 in training, paid by each worker. And they were required to attend annual training upgrades,

too.

A union representative said his union is offended by the way the workers are being treated.

"This offends us," he said. "You guys are first responders in an emergency cleanup. The reason you are here is the same thing that happened years ago. They tried to do it cheap."

He said there was a skilled labor shortage in Montana. "I don't think there is any justification here and I recommend you get union representation."

Konzen pointed out that Montana's Department of Labor does have a wage for asbestos cleanup workers. That wage is \$14.55 per hour plus another \$5.10 an hour for benefits.

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